

May 9, 1997

Gene Lewis

before the  
Committee on Commerce  
Subcommittee on Energy and Power

United States House of Representatives

on

Electric Utility Industry Restructuring:  
*Why shouldn't all consumers have a choice?.*

Summary of Gene Lewis  
May 9, 1997  
Dallas, TX

- I want to urge you not to view the debate over America's **electric utility** system as a fight between one interest group and another.
- My name is Gene Lewis. I am not a special interest. I am not a lobbyist. I am not on the payroll of any utility or energy company. But I have come here today because, to me, the effort to bring more affordable electricity to homeowners is not some abstract economic policy issue to be debated by hired industry reps.
- No one likes to pay expensive electricity bills. But now my wife and I have realized that the artificially high price of electricity may drive my wife and I out of our own home.
- My social security check amounts to \$1,200 every month. That means I'm paying a third of my income to Texas Utilities. Over the last ten years, I estimate that I have paid some \$30,000 in utility bills.
- I am a very energy-conscious homeowner. But we have no gas utility in our house. We are hostage to the monthly utility bill.
- If this was some other household expense, I would do what every other homeowner does -- spend less and shop around for a better deal.
- That is why my wife and I must now, reluctantly, give serious consideration to moving out of the home we built and find a smaller house. We simply have no way of getting out of our local utility.
- I'm told -- and I'm sure many will tell you -- that there are several studies showing that bringing competition to our utility system will dramatically lower prices -- maybe by as much as 40 percent over the long run.
- I would urge you to remember that this is an issue of basic, bread and butter economics for homeowners and families across the country. Don't lose sight of us.

**Testimony of Gene Lewis**

**May 9, 1997**

Dallas, TX

My name is Gene Lewis and I live at 201 Rainbow Circle, Rockwall, Texas. It is a privilege to be invited before this committee. I believe the work you are doing and the issue you are considering is one of the most important -- and overlooked -- problems in America. I want to urge you NOT to view the debate over America's electric utility system as a fight between one interest group and another.

I am not a special interest. I am not a lobbyist. I am not on the payroll of any energy companies. I am a 71 year old native of Oklahoma. I graduated from Tulsa Central High School in 1943, spent two years in the Navy in World War II, and returned to graduate from Oklahoma University in 1948. I am married and have raised four children, three of which graduated from the University of Missouri. Three of the four live in Dallas today and they share their seven

children, our grandchildren, with us. My concerns are their concerns.

I have come here today because, to me, the effort to bring affordable electricity to homeowners is not some abstract policy. It is a living, breathing opportunity for my family and for countless seniors who face the same problems we do.

No one likes to pay expensive electricity bills. But now my wife and I have realized that the artificially high price of electricity is pushing us to consider moving out of our home.

It's kind of embarrassing to disclose your misfortunes to strangers. I was raised during tough times -- I had a dream of a nice home to retire in. I thought I had it. Since 1984, my property taxes have doubled (\$1,100 to \$2,000) and my electricity bill is also doubling. At the same time, in retirement, my income has been cut in half. It's not a pretty sight.

you can see that from my bank statement in January of 1997 my Texas Utilities bank draft was \$402.14. Compare that to my social security draft and you will recognize that the two are out of proportion and out of reason.

This was, unfortunately, no accounting error. I am a very energy conscious homeowner. My wife and grandchildren tease me for griping about turning off the lights and changing the thermostat. I bought ceiling fans for all the rooms, I wear sweaters in the winter and next to nothing -- not a pretty sight -- in the summer. We have no gas utility where we live. Everything is electric and as a result, we are hostage to the monthly utility bill. I even tried propane heaters in the coldest winters (my wife stopped that.)

If this was another normal household expense, like food, I would do what any other homeowner does... spend less and shop around for a better deal. But as you know, Mr. Chairman, our monopoly utility system does not let homeowners shop around. There is no competition, no choices. No special rates for seniors.

A monopoly rubs me the **wrong way**. I have watched them make mistakes, waste money, and make us pay for the consequences.

If there were competition in electricity, I believe we would see improved service, lower prices and many technological innovations. You'd have to be asleep not to see the information advances that occur everyday in every other industry for the consumer. With mobile phones, beepers, faxes, P.C.s, E-mails, web sites, and prices coming down all the time .... it should happen in the electric service business as well.

Congressman Hall, I am a Republican and have lived in your district for 18 years. I have voted for you every time,. You are conservative to me, and I am reaching out to you to help me out here. This can happen in my lifetime. I don't want to wait any longer than necessary for my kids and grandkids to get the benefits.

I hear, and I'm sure many of these other folks will tell you. that there are several studies that show competition will bring lower prices. But the truth is, I don't need

studies. This is a matter of common sense. Everywhere consumers have choices, and competitors are competing to be chosen, customers win. Why should our laws continue to prop up a system that was developed about a century ago and today gives us ZERO choices and steadily climbing prices?

My wife and I have maintained a log on electric expenses over the years because **it's** an expense that is so pervasive. When I built my house in 1978 my bills were \$150 to \$250 in the worst months . . . as you've seen, they're now around \$400 per month. Over the past ten years, I have sent \$30,000 dollars to TU to heat and cool my home. Over the last 18 years, I've paid TU about half of what it cost me to build the place. Is that ridiculous or what? I want some relief and you gentlemen can help me. Congressman Hall: Rockwall is the smallest county in Texas . . . don't you wish we had an electric bill to match?

In your deliberations, I would urge you to remember that this is an issue of basic, bread and butter economics for homeowners and seniors across the country. Please don't lose sight of us. We're not big businesses, we're not

lobbyists, we don't work for utilities or own stock in them. But we pay our bills. And as long as a MONOPOLY keeps those bills astronomical, the majority of us will wonder how long we can afford to keep paying them.

Recently, someone handed me a petition supporting customers having this thing called a choice in their electricity supplier. Novel concept. I signed it. It includes hundreds of signatures, collected over the last few weeks. They asked me to bring it along. Here it is. Please don't forget us.